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ABSTRACT

Teaching styles reflect the beliefs and values that teachers hold about the learners' role in learning; learning styles provide insight into the ways learners perceive, interact with and respond to the environment in which learning occurs. Many teachers teach in the way they were taught which usually can be characterized as field independent (content oriented, formal teaching methods, less student involvement, structured class activities); a style that can work well with students who are field dependent (prefer structure and guidance from the teacher). When students' learning preferences match their instructor's teaching styles, student motivation and achievement usually improve, but some students may do better with a learning/teaching style mismatch. Learners need to become better all-around learners by adapting their learning style to non-preferred teaching styles. Teachers can become more flexible by being willing to change their view of the role of students. The following five perspectives on teaching can help teachers to identify, articulate, and justify their teaching approaches: (1) transmission (focus on content, teacher directed); (2) developmental (values students' prior knowledge, directs students to develop more complex understandings); (3) apprenticeship (authentic tasks in real world settings); (4) nurturing (focus on interpersonal elements and students' emotional and intellectual needs); and (5) social reform (relate ideas explicitly to the lives of the students). (CG)

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MYTHS AND REALITIES

NO. 26

Teaching Style vs. Learning Style

by Bettina Lankard Brown
2003

Teaching and learning styles are the behaviors or actions that teachers and learners exhibit in the learning exchange. Teaching behaviors reflect the beliefs and values that teachers hold about the learner's role in the exchange (Heimlich and Norland 2002). Learners' behaviors provide insight into the ways learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the environment in which learning occurs (Ladd and Ruby 1999). Over the years, questions about the congruence of teaching and learning styles and the potential for flexibility in their use have surfaced: Do the teaching styles of teachers match students' learning styles? Can individuals learn effectively when instructional delivery does not match their preferred learning style? Can teaching and learning styles be adapted or modified? These and similar questions are explored in the Myths and Realities.

Do Teachers Teach the Way They've Been Taught or Learn Best?

"Research supports the concept that most teachers teach the way they learn" (Stitt-Gohdes 2001, p. 136). Since a great many teachers have experienced academic success in learning environments that were instructor centered and relied heavily on lecture, it is understandable that their preferred style of teaching, at least initially, would be to repeat "what worked with them." Typically these teachers are field independent, that is, they are more content oriented and prefer to use more formal teaching methods, favoring less student involvement and more structured class activities (Hayes and Allinson 1997; Pithers 2001). This style works especially well for field-dependent students who want to be told what they should learn and given the resources to acquire the specified body of knowledge or skills. This may be why most training is provided through instructor-led classrooms in the corporate environment (Caudron 2000). This strategy can be effective when employees are highly motivated to learn specific content that is relevant to their careers. However, instructor-centered training is not as effective when training involves context—the "physical, emotional, and intellectual environment that surrounds an experience and gives it meaning" (ibid., p. 55).

One reason instructors are led to teach the way they learn is that they are not skilled in adult learning theory. This is especially true for trainers who have little education about and understanding of adult learning principles. Classroom teachers who are skilled in adult learning principles and have experience with theories about student-centered learning and constructivism are more likely to adopt student-centered instruction (Stitt-Gohdes, Crews, and McCannon 1999), even if it is not the way they learned or prefer to learn. These teachers have broad views of how teaching can occur and strong beliefs about the need to engage learners in the learning process. They are aware of the changing demographics of classrooms and the influence of technology on students' ways of learning (Glenn 2000; Stitt-Gohdes 2003). They are more likely to substitute self-directed learning opportunities and interactive learning environments for the traditional lecture and make use of "varied resources to create personally meaningful educational experiences" (Glenn 2000, p. 14).

Do the Best Learning Outcomes Occur When Teaching Style Matches Learning Style?

Much research supports the view that when students' learning preferences match their instructor's teaching styles, student motivation and achievement usually improve (Miller 2001; Stitt-Gohdes 2003). However, many of these studies look at the achievements of high school students, not adult learners. Other studies show that matching teaching and learning styles is not an effective determinant of the best arrangement for adult basic skill learners, primarily because learning style may differ according to age and situational factors such as the type of class or subject being studied (Spoon and Shell 1998).

Hayes and Allinson (1997) found that the matching of teaching/learning styles is more beneficial to vocational students who are field independent—those who prefer more autonomy and less personal interaction, and that mismatching is more beneficial for field-dependent students—those who prefer more guidance and structure. "This may be because field-dependent students benefit from the structure that field-independent teachers typically provide" (Hayes and Allinson 1997, p. 185). However, because most vocational classes are composed of students who have different style preferences, teachers need to adopt a flexible approach to their instructional practice so that their ultimate approach is integrated (Nuckles 2000; Pithers 2001). David Kolb, who is credited with initiating the learning style movement, notes that "it is more effective to design curriculum so that there is some way for learners of every learning style to engage with the topic, so that every type of learner has an initial way to connect with the material, and then begin to stretch his or her learning capability in other learning modes" (Delahoussaye 2002, p. 31).

Can an Individual's Approach to Learning Be Modified?

Because learning is an ongoing process, occurring over the span of one's lifetime and delivered by a variety of instructors with a variety of teaching styles in a variety of situations, learners need to be able to adjust their cognitive styles. They need to become better all-around learners by "investing extra effort in underdeveloped or underutilized styles" (Delahoussaye 2002, p. 31). Pithers (2002) reports on studies by Rush and Moore that explore the feasibility of promoting learner adaptability through training. These researchers discovered that students whose cognitive styles were more field dependent were able to change the strength of their style through training, which suggests that cognitive style may be a flexible construct and malleable over the long term. These views were also noted by Hayes and Allinson (1997), who contend that "exposing learners to learning activities that are mismatched with their preferred learning style will help them develop the learning competencies necessary to cope with situations involving a range of different learning requirements" (p. 3).

Can a Teacher's Approach to Teaching Be Modified?

"How educators select their teaching strategies and implement techniques is a function of their beliefs and values regarding the methods and can be modified to fit within the unique belief system of the educator. The manner in which any method, whether lecture or game, discovery-based learning or discussion is used within a learning event is the choice of the educator and should be a reflection of his or her philosophy" (Heimlich and Norland 2002, p. 20). Thus, before teachers can attempt to develop more flexible teaching styles, they must be receptive to the idea of change, beginning with a change in their beliefs about the students' role in the learning environment.

Being student centered engages teachers in a humanistic approach to education in which they function as facilitators of learning (Nuckles 2000). Teachers who desire to be more student centered must be aware of the kinds of learning experiences that students most value, as these may differ depending on the learners' particular stages of development, age, and gender (Spoon and Schell 1998). In studying a group of international students in a business administration program, Ladd and Ruby (1999) found that of primary interest to students was establishing warm personal relationships with their instructors. Their preferred style of learning was to have direct contact with materials, topics, or situations being studied. Knowing this type of information can help instructors develop course structures that provide a better fit between instructional goals and students' learning style preferences (Stitt-Gohdes 2001).

Pratt (2002) presents five perspectives on teaching and urges teachers to use these perspectives to identify, articulate, and justify their teaching approaches rather than simply adopting one practice or another.

- **Transmission**: Teachers focus on content and determine what students should learn and how they should learn it. Feedback is directed to students' errors.
- **Developmental**: Teachers value students' prior knowledge and direct student learning to the development of increasingly complex ways of reasoning and problem solving.
- **Apprenticeship**: Teachers provide students with authentic tasks in real work settings.
- **Nurturing**: Teachers focus on the interpersonal elements of student learning—listening, getting to know students, and responding to students' emotional and intellectual needs.
- **Social Reform**: Teachers tend to relate ideas explicitly to the lives of the students.

"Most teachers have only one or two perspectives as their dominant view of teaching…[however] similar actions, intentions, and even beliefs can be found in more than one perspective" (Pratt 2002, p. 6). Proficient student-centered teachers are able to use a variety of styles so that their ultimate style is integrated.

Conclusion

Research has shown the uniqueness of different teaching and learning styles and identified the characteristics associated with each style. Although there are benefits to the matching of teaching style and learning style, it appears that this alone does not guarantee greater learner achievement. Age, educational level, and motivation influence each student's learning so that what was once preferred may no longer be the student's current preferred learning style. Teachers need to examine their belief structure regarding education and engage in an "ongoing process of diagnosis, with self and with learners, including observation, questioning, obtaining evaluative feedback, and critical reflection" (Nuckles 2000, p. 6). "Each teacher is unique and can use his or her style to be as effective an educator as possible" (Heimlich and Norland 2002, p. 23).

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